DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 199 739 CS 206 202

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TITLE The Tutor-Trained Teacher: The Role of the Writing Center in Teacher Education.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (32nd, Dallas, TX, March 26-28, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English Teacher Education; Higher Education; *Laboratory Training; *Teaching Experience; *Tutoring; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Laboratories

ABSTRACT

The college writing center can be most helpful in preparing prospective English teachers for the classroom. Students could be required to spend some time each week tutoring in the writing center. Although the methods course focuses on the theory of teaching writing, the work in the center can put that theory into practice. Before actually tutoring, the students work through several sessions of reading essay models, role playing, and tutoring with supervision. Each tutor also reads a handbook for tutors and becomes familiar with the materials in the center. During the initial meetings of the course, the tutors also go through the same composing process as the freshman composition student. The writing center provides a training ground for future English teachers to discover more about individualization, composition theory, grading practices, resources, approaches to teaching, and the entire scope of writing, in addition to a wide variety of students and writing styles. In helping other students to learn about writing, they, in turn, become better writers and better teachers of writing. (HOD)

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The Tutor-Trained Teacher: The Role of the Writing Center in Teacher Education

A Paper Delivered at the
1981 CCCC in Dallas, Texas

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The Tutor-Trained Teacher:

The Role of the Writing Center in Teacher Education

The teacher of communication skills, especially the novice teacher, faces a most difficult task in the classroom. Often, college students become English teachers because they enjoy reading and can write well, due mainly to exposure to language and "good grammer sense" developed by that reading, not necessarily because of writing instruction. Included in the typical English teaching program are many courses on literature, some courses on language, and a few on composition; freshman composition may even be substituted by an "honors" or an English majors' course in which students write about literature. How does this kind of program prepare student teachers for what awaits them in the public schoolroom? How does a teacher who loves literature react to a student who has no interest in reading? How does that same teacher who knows how to write a unified essay or research paper react to a student who can't write a sentence or doesn't know the difference between a vowel and a consonant?

There are no easy answers in teacher training; however, using the writing center as a training ground for the prospective English teacher can be most helpful in that teacher's preparation for the classroom. During the pre-professional semester, in addition to enrolling in a methods course, the students could be required to spend some time each week tutoring in the Writing Center, and are required to do just that at Pittsburg State University. Although the methods course focuses on the theory of teaching writing, the work in the Center puts that theory into practice.

Following are some suggestions on how such a program might work. Before actually tutoring, the students work through several sessions of reading essay models, role playing, and tutoring with supervision. Moreover, each tutor reads the Center handbook for tutors and becomes familiar with Writing Center materials. During the initial meetings of the course, the tutors also go through the same composing process as the freshman composition class goes through (for example, free writing, loop writing, interviewing, autobiographical narrative,) a process which builds tutor empathy for the composition student.

Because of the humanistic approach of many Writing Centers, the tutor, who cannot rely on plugging a student into a machine, quickly learns to be versatile and to rely on herself as a resource for the student. Although there are numerous textbooks in the Center, the tutor is encouraged to shy away from these since many students suffer from "bibliophobia," a simple fear of any bound material; however, the tutor may have dittoed "handouts" (less fear-evoking than books), ranging from punctuation to paragraph development to essay organization, to offer the student as information guides to take home after explanation in the Center. These handouts should not be exercise-oriented but rather should center on explanation of typical writing problems using student examples. Many of these handouts might offer brief exercises on some of the basic skills of writing; however, the tutors are encouraged to work first within the student's own writing. As the tutors see the need, additional handouts are developed by them, and they also revise existing handouts. Here, then, tutors have the opportunity to learn what materials work and why and to develop their own resources.

These resource materials available to the students who come to the Writing Center for help are also available to the tutors, who, many times, feel inadequate as writers. Even though having "good grammar sense,"

they are often at a loss to explain these concepts to basic writing students. Thus, they find themselves forced to review grammar, and that review usually is more relevant since the tutors realize that they will have to be a "handbook" for their students.

Although a knowledge of grammar plays an important role in the Writing Center situation, the tutors find that an overall view of the essay is most important; in fact, mechanics, diction, and style take a back seat to content and organization. Thus, Macrorie's "English" or empty rhetoric becomes more difficult to deal with than simple mechanics, a rather easy task in comparison. In this instance, the tutor becomes more than a handbook or a dictionary. The tutor becomes a "sounding board" for the student. In other words, the tutor becomes a part of the communication spiral in which the student takes an experience, talks out that experience with the tutor, plans to write about the experience, does the actual writing, reads aloud the composition, and again discusses the experience. In no way does the tutor write the paper but simply provides oral communication and feedback. Sometimes this entire composing process occurs in the Center, but more frequently, only part occurs there. Often the "talking out" of a writing assignment is neglected in the classroom at the beginning of the spiral, resulting in a student who didn't know what to write in the first place and, consequently, did a poor job.

An awareness of the sequence of the composing process parallels the awareness of a sequence of instruction. Typically, a freshman composition course follows a pattern which first focuses on personal experience which would include freewriting and journal entries and then the descriptive and narrative modes of discourse, followed by the expository mode. However, a course might be arranged, as Frank D' Angelo has done, in his book, Process and Thought in Composition by static and dynamic modes. The approaches to the teaching of writing are practically endless, and the tutors

quickly sort out these approaches and the accompanying textbooks and usually find their own approaches to teaching writing while doing so. Included in approaches to teaching writing are styles of teaching--what Richard Fulkerson has called, "expressive, formalistic, mimetic, and rhetorical."[1] For example, the expressive teacher would perhaps use journal writing and free writing, while a rhetorical-centered teacher would use Aristotle's concept of classical rhetoric. Or, a teacher might use tagmemics in the invention process. Thus, the tutor comes to understand these several approaches and styles, as they are filtered from teacher to student, because they are no longer theory taught in an advanced composition or methods course but practical ideas which are actually used in the classroom. The tutors are also invited to the classroom to study theory put into practice firsthand, since the Writing Center student's perception of a teacher's approach is not always clear or accurate. A file of writing assignments by the various teachers also aids the tutors to make a link between classroom and Center.

Moreover, the tutors not only witness several approaches to teaching, but they also see varying methods of grading, a skill in which they lack experience and expertise. In effect, they see both sides of the grading system--the teacher's and the student's--the giver and the receiver. As a third party, the tutor can often make sense of the teacher's comments while the student cannot. On the other hand, the tutor can also see how teacher comments affect the student. For instance, are the comments helpful in directing the student about how to revise the paper to improve it, or does the paper simply say "revise?" Are there positive comments on the paper to increase the student's confidence as a writer, or are there sarcastic comments or all negative comments (i.e. "this is duller reading than real estate ads")? Are there any comments at all or just a grade and no justification? The tutor learns what kind of comments are helpful or frustrating to the writer. The

tutor learns how to make some of these comments understandable to the student. Then, in the tutorial session, the tutor also learns what oral comments prove to be helpful to the writer. Of course, the tutor often has the advantage over the teacher since the tutor can usually interpert how the student reacts to editing--whether or not it is comprehensible or needs further explanation. Then, too, the tutor is able, as that third party, to often "get through" to the student whereas the teacher had been unable to break that communication barrier.

Although freshman composition writers comprise the majority of students who visit the Writing Center--and the tutors have the opportunity to see a wide variety of writing assignments in those classes--they also work with students from the entire campus, ranging from freshman to graduate students and with subjects from business to industrial technology. Some of the typical writing assignments include lab reports for the sciences, summaries or abstracts, interviews, business correspondence, informative and analytical reports, and research papers often involving different styles from the MLA Handbook. As a result, the tutor sees beyond the discipline of English, that writing is and should be an interdisciplinary activity and that different disciplines use differnet formats and styles. Such an insight of interdisciplinary writing might be effectively introduced in the secondary school, if not already present, when the tutor becomes a responsible writing teacher.

At the same time that the tutors deal with writing assignments in other areas, they also find that the Center students need help with effective study skills, notetaking, outlining, and test taking, which all involve writing. Therefore, the tutor may very well have to discuss with the student scheduling of time and also hints on how to study. The student may need an understanding of test vocabulary, essay exam organization, and

time allotment. The tutor may, in this situation, after discussing testing procedures, administer a sample essay exam and then discuss it with the student.

Besides being involved with a wide variety of writing assignments, the tutor also works with a spectrum of students. More often than not, the students who come to the Center for help fall into the category of freshman composition students who have basic writing problems. The tutors--who are usually very good writers with few, if any, writing problems--must learn to communicate with these failing, often hostile, students. The tutors are, in this instance and in all tutoring instances, as Kenneth Broffee notes, not "little teachers"[2] but peer tutors who can relate and communicate that relation to the troubled student writer. As a result of the tutor seeing the necessity to build confidence in the basic writing student, in effect championing this student, the tutor develops a different attitude about the failing student; accordingly, the failing student becomes to the tutor not the student who the teacher can't work with, but the underdog who has the potential to become a good writer. This attitude change toward poor students is essential in the lab as the tutor makes discoveries about how students learn and how to teach them, discoveries which should be carried over to the classroom as this change in attitude should also be carried over.

Similarly, the tutors also make more discoveries about teaching students who use non-standard English or who have English as a Second Language.[3] In both of these cases, the tutors are prepared for these students during the class session. In addition to understanding dialect differences, the tutors gain a knowledge of cultural variety. In essence, working with these types of students often serves to break stereotypes as these writers

also become underdogs. In yet another instance, tutors sometimes find themselves working with emotionally disturbed students who see the tutors as a ready audience. Also, students who have learning disabilities or severe reading problems, which the teacher often cannot diagnose, find their way to the Center where the tutors must learn to cope with these special problems, a subject also treated in class sessions. Moreover, the tutors, besides working with students of varying personalities and abilities, must be equally able to cope with the student who writes well but still wants to improve, in many ways a more difficult task. In each of these situations, the tutor acquires patience and tolerance for all different kinds of students, and also realizes that different approaches work with different students.

Besides the experiences the tutor gain during the everyday interaction with students, the entire scope and theory behind the Writing Center can be transferred to the classroom when the tutors become teachers in the public schools. Individualized instruction thus becomes an integral part of the classroom as well as group work, peer tutoring, and the concept of editing. The tutor-turned-teacher can establish a learning center based on the college Center within the classroom or for the benefit of the entire school system. Placing responsibility on the students for helping each other with writing assignments makes them aware of writing as other than teacher-centered. Furthermore, when students realize that their peers will be reading their writing, more care is taken in the writing process. Thus, writing becomes more real for the students, and for the teacher, it relieves some of the burden for being sole editor and evaluator.

Then, working as tutors in the Center offers the prospective writing teacher much which can be transferred to the classroom; however, these tutors also offer qualities to the Center. In general, these English majors are some of the best writers on the campus which means they have a concept

of what good writing should be. Moreover, they usually have been through the system of writing courses and thus know and empathize with the beginning student. There is also little age difference between tutor and student, in most cases, which promotes the peer tutoring. These are qualities which paraprofessional or lab assistants often do not possess.

However, using future English teachers as tutors is not a panacea for some of teacher training or for Writing Center staffing, although required tutoring does relieve the financial burden on the Center. Sometimes, it is difficult for the tutor to see beyond the mechanical or proofreading part of writing. This is one of the tutoring or, for that matter, teaching traps which can easily be fallen into. Included in these traps is the difficulty of not providing the answers but only questioning. In turn, the Center, if it relies solely on English teaching majors as tutors, faces the problem of continuity in staffing.

In spite of these problems, the Writing Center provides a training ground for future English teachers to discover more about individuation, composition theory, grading practices, resources, approaches to teaching, and the entire scope of writing, in addition to a wide variety of students and writing styles. In helping other students to learn about writing, they, in turn, become better writers and better teachers of writing.

NOTES

[1]Richard Fulkerson, "Four Philosophies of Composition," CCC. 30 (1979), 343-48.

[2]Paula Beck, Thomas Hawkins, and Marcia Silver, "Training and Using Peer Tutors," CE, 40 (1979), 446.

[3]For Black English, I recommend J. L. Dillard's Black English (Random House, 1972) for tutor reading. Usually for problems with ESL students, a teacher of those students is invited into the class for a session.